

THE WILLIAMSBURG FLYER

March 1983

Every year about this time you get the same ole song and dance. I'm not alluding to taxes, license renewals or Washington's Birthday sales, not even ice and snow. Instead the point is well made regarding the antics of the beasts and birds as Spring advances. Even the most hardened city ear can hardly fail to notice the rejoiceful reverberations of the spring peepers. What with all the moisture we've had bestowed on our fading winter the little hylids have alot to sing about. But don't forget the pre-dawn and early morning opera enacted daily by our feathered troubadours. The cardinal usually begins with a solo setting the stage for the rest of the supporting cast of robins, chickadees, titmouse, Carolina wrens, towhees and the plaintive mourning dove. If you're a late riser you're depriving yourself of the essence of Spring's arrival. Our Gregorian calendar may have the season some days hence. Nature's chronology, developed long before calendars, sets its own rules.

As a general rule our monthly meetings are program oriented. This holds true for Wednesday March 16, 7:30 p.m. We won't give you any song or dance, as it were, but you will be entertained by the talk given by Dr. Gus Hall on his birding adventures in South America. Dr. Hall is an all-around superb naturalist. Although he instructs college students at William and Mary in botany his interests depart widely from the plant kingdom. His North American bird list tops 600 and he is an accomplished pianist to boot. So get yourself on over to room 117 Millington Hall at William and Mary and hear from a true field biologist.

Presquile National Wildlife refuge, in the James River near Hopewell, is the destination of our March 19 field trip. Established in 1952, the refuge is managed primarily as a resting and feeding area for thousands of waterfowl that have traditionally wintered in the region. Originally an oxbow bend in the James river, the 1,329 acres that comprise the refuge became a true island in 1934 when a navigation channel was cut across the narrow base of the peninsula. In 1954, 1000 acres of water in the river around the refuge were closed to hunting of waterfowl.

After crossing the channel by ferry, a 3/4-mile trail will take us through the island's three distinct types of habitat. In the tidal marsh, some of the waterfowl should still be present, feeding on the seeds produced earlier by lush growths of rice cutgrass, smartweeds, wild rice and pickerelweed. We could see marsh hawks, snipe and terns, which winter here, probably herons and egrets, and if lucky, perhaps a rail or bittern. And muskrats are always plentiful, their small dome-shaped houses visible out in the marsh.

The trail passes along an 800-acre hardwood swamp where several species of ducks such as mallards, blacks and wood ducks take advantage of the waters provided by high river tides and the two main creeks that enter the swamp from the east side of the island. Wood ducks nest in the cavities of dead and decaying trees found along the creeks. The tree species that thrive in the swamp mud--black gum, water tupelo, ash and yellow poplar--produce mast that is excellent duck food. Other possible swamp sightings include such permanent residents as pileated woodpeckers and barred owls, and we might spot early arrival prothonotary warblers, abundant here during the warm months, as are northern parulas and common yellowthroats. In the small mammal category, a racoon, striped skunk or red fox could put in an appearance.

The last habitat is 275 acres of agricultural land where thousands of Canada geese spend the winter grazing in wheat, clover and fescue fields provided for them. White-tailed deer may be seen feeding on the same plants.

Finally, the trail comes to the cannon net site where refuge personnel trap Canada geese and ducks for banding as part of an effort to compile data on migrations and populations.

As you can see, the refuge offers much to enjoy and experience, so do plan to join us for the trip. Remember, we will depart from the Colonial Williamsburg

Information Center parking lot (to the immediate right of the Center from the Parkway entrance) at 7:00 a.m. Also, be prepared for cool (cold??) weather and muddy conditions. Food and/or munchies always fit the scene on bird trips. We should return by 3:30--4:00 p.m.

At the March 5 meeting of the Virginia Society of Ornithology's Board of Directors several noteworthy items were discussed. The Hampton Roads Bird Club is well on its way for hosting the 1984 annual meeting of the Society at the Hotel Chamberlain in Hampton. The meeting is scheduled for May 4, 5, 6 next year. The annual May meeting this year is in Roanoke.

Each year the VSO sponsors a foray in one of the state's counties in hopes of elucidating that area's breeding bird community. This year, June 7-12, the foray will focus on Giles County, outside of Blacksburg. The headquarters will be the Mt. Lake Biological Station. Further details will appear soon, so if you are interested mark your calendar now.

The VSO is looking into the possibility of undertaking a Breeding Bird Atlas for the state. This massive project takes five years to complete, and essentially attempts to document every breeding bird species in every nook and cranny in the state. Sue Ridd, a graduate student at William and Mary and former member of our club, has taken on the initial pre-planning responsibilities for the Atlas. Maryland is just beginning theirs and several northeastern and western states have already completed them.

The society is exploring avenues for placing bluebird boxes along the inter-states. Preliminary talks have been favorable and supportive with the Highway Department and guidelines are being investigated.

Rich Goll is putting the finishing touches on the state's Rare Bird Alert, while Ruth Beck, fresh from her successful leadership (along with Tom Armour) of the VSO's Outer Banks field trip in February, plans some additions to the state's Birding Site Guide.

If you are interested in joining the VSO (and by all means you really should-- we are an affiliate) contact Thelma Dalmas, 520 Rainbow Forest Dr., Lynchburg, Va. 24502.

The Outer Banks field trip, already referred to, was blessed by magnificent weather though a bit windy, February 18-20. The group of 60-70 eager birders from all over the Old Dominion got a fine showing of Tar Heel birds. White ibis were unusually numerous while waterfowl numbers in general were low as they have been all over the east. One group was fortunate enough to encounter a research team involved in banding and sexing Canada geese, and studying the hybridization amongst mallards and black ducks. The birders got an in depth demonstration on the finer aspects of waterfowl study much to their edification and delight. Additional high-light species for the trip included a single brown pelican, a common merganser and a lesser black-backed gull. Some folks even got to see an American bittern.

Our own field trip to False Cape State Park was snowed out February 12. But a rescheduled trip there on February 26 was excellent. Despite very strong winds and few if any birds the sixteen of us who made the journey were more than pleased. With Mark Lassiter (we all remember him from York River State Park) providing the color commentary the contingent was given a grand tour of this unique maritime habitat. Impressive dunes and evergreen forests bounded on the east by the Atlantic Ocean and on the west by Back Bay and speckled with swamps and marshes captivated everyone. While the few ducks (pintails, gadwall, shovelers, green-winged teal) gave us some birding it was the wild pigs and their piglets that stole the show as well as one white-tailed deer that was a partial albino. I am sure everyone who was

on the trip will echo the message that you've just got to see this fragile area to have the thrill of its magnificent natural beauty. The pounding ocean-front yielded a few gannets for close inspection, sanderlings at the surf's lap and some distant flying loons and red-breasted mergansers. The group didn't really need birds. The park was show enough.

Leigh Jones' Bluebird Committee has been hammering, painting and drilling like Crazy (Hi, Alice) over the last few weeks. In all, 40 boxes have been assembled by the determined effort of Charlie Hacker, Dick Hines, Tom Armour, Sam Hart, Bob Morris, Bob and Cynthia Long, Clay Hudson, Paul Baker, Dick Springe, Grant Olson and Bill Phippen. Once they were put together painters Barbara Ema and Arlene Fabbri touched them up. Dick Hines even went so far as to inquire around Eastern State Hospital (he doesn't really live there) about putting out boxes there. The administration gave the approving nod and as of March 5 the westernmost grounds have 9 bluebird homes. Also, with Jewel Thomas' assistance 5 more boxes have been placed at York River State Park to bring the total to ten. Next move--bluebirds.

It's about time to call a halt to dues collection for renewing members. After this month anyone we haven't heard from will have to be dropped from our mailing list. You may pay at the March 16 meeting or send payment to Leigh Jones, 429 Scotland St., Apt. #3, Williamsburg. We should all chirp a welcome to new club members Evelyn Becker, Dick Mahone and Tess Madison.

Don't forget line 20 on your state income tax return. The Virginia nongame research program needs your support. If everyone gives just a little it will really add up, and the state as a whole will be the better for it. Even some of my students have pledged to contribute. Come on!!

As usual our members continue to snatch a part of the local news. Cynthia Long will be a featured speaker at this year's Garden Symposium, an event that attracts participants from all corners of the nation. Mitchell Byrd, taken "Advantage" of, was the cover story for that weekly publication, March 2. Bill Snyder put his well known writing talents to work in the March issue of "Discover Williamsburg" as he explained the horticultural art of pleaching, "a method of planting, pruning and training trees to produce hedge-like walls or arbors." And the beat goes on!

Although the winter has been sparse on waterfowl the birding activity has maintained a warm and often hectic pace. With the departure of our star hummingbird on January 28 things seemed a bit dismal. However, the snowy weekends which ensued brought out numerous water pipits along the Colonial Parkway. Thom Blair saw several along route 199 February 6 and Leigh Jones counted 34 at Mill Creek on the Parkway and 22 more at St. George's Farm on February 12. Also on that day 14 snipe were clearly visible in the snow near Jamestown Festival Park. Bob and Cynthia Long, over in Queen's Lake, had a red-shouldered hawk in their garden, and they report a pheasant has been in their neighborhood since last fall. Likewise, Kyle Dupuis has been seeing a pheasant in the Hamlet off Olden Town Road. Anne Smith has had up to three northern orioles at her goodie trays and at least 1 pine siskin. Two of the latter species have been noted zooming up and down Ferncliff Drive off Route 5 recently as well.

Another lark sparrow popped up in the state the first week in February, this time in Montross, Westmoreland County. An attempt to "get" the bird by yours truly, Brian Taber and Leigh Jones proved futile though we were treated to gracious hospitality and three hours of super bird talk with Enoch and Sylvia Johnson. From their living room they are able to casually observe bald eagles, swans and several great cormorants. They even had wood ibis one year!

Brian's western tanager of January 29-30 fame reappeared in his Gloucester Point yard February 20. His Bullock's race northern oriole virtually camps out on his feeder tray and tolerates the bullying carried on by the house finches.

A male house finch showed up at my Queen's Lake feeder February 12 for my first record of the species here, and a fox sparrow was a regular during the snowy days of February 10-14.

Charlie Hacker was fortunate enough to capture and band an orange-crowned warbler in his yard in Edgehill near Yorktown on February 19. This should remind everyone of Anne Smith's orange-crown we all delighted to last winter.

Dorothy Mitchell of Newport News called to say she had an immature white-crowned sparrow at her feeders and an irregularly seen red-breasted nuthatch. The sparrow is quite unusual for eastern Virginia and the nuthatch is a rarity for this winter, while it may be common during other winters.

An injured female hairy woodpecker was brought to William and Mary for rehabilitation for a bruised neck and wing. The young lady has been successfully repaired and released at the Blair's on Goodwin Street.

Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge has had at least one white fronted goose recently and four Egyptian geese, the latter are most definitely escapees.

The winter of 1982-83 has been an off year for northern finches as anyone with feeders can attest. While purple finches have at times been abundant and house finches are locally common we've had no indication of big movements of pine siskins or evening grosbeaks. As noted previously there are a couple of siskins around, and not until March 6 had anyone reported grosbeaks. However, John Williams spied a couple of them on that date in Skipwith Farms and by the next day up to ten were irregularly descending on sumptuous sunflower seed feasts. You know how those guys are. Very possibly the invasion is just beginning!

Since the last two weeks of Ground hog month I think the world has turned to robins. They've been everywhere--woods, fields, yards, high, low--and in huge numbers. Perhaps the wet weather has made worming a picnic for them. Likewise, feeder areas are beginning to attract the raucous herds of grackles and cowbirds; a sure sign that the weather is looking up.

Having no place else to go on February 5 Rich Goll, Cindy Fletcher, Leigh Jones and Brian Taber defied the winter and made an excursion to "Little Switzerland", (Highland County, Va.). The quest was for golden eagles, red crossbills, and a couple of feeder-visiting dickcissels in Monterey. The crew tallied two eagles but struck out on the other species. They did, however, find black-capped chickadees, raven, horned lark and evening grosbeaks not to mention the greatest lunch at a country diner you could imagine.

As if Highland County rarities aren't enough Rich and Cindy got the rare bird report of a possible mountain bluebird (a western species) that was being seen at the Manassas Battlefield National Park. So bright and early on February 27 they made the dash to the designated location at the junction of routes 234 and 29. Birders were spread all over the area and no one had seen "the bluebird". After an hour or so it was located along with two eastern bluebirds. The bird was a dreamy pastel blue, almost white, and showed no hint of the rust markings on the breast that easterns do. Now mountain bluebirds have no rust either, and hence the speculation that this was in fact another Virginia first. However, close observations of the bird's behavior, posture and almost white plumage seem to indicate that the individual is only a genetic variant of the eastern bluebird. Rich was so "keyed" up that he lost the ones to the car, and if it hadn't been for Tom Armour's screwdriver there's no telling how he would have gotten Cindy's car home. Tom was able to photograph the strange bluebird and I'm sure we can coax him in to showing us the slides. As for Rich . . .

A note in the March/April issue of Bird Watcher's Digest reports that a comprehensive survey of the California condor determined that there are only 19 birds left. The species thus seems to be "within a breath of extinction". Such a tragic waste.

A spot on the local news recently outlined an innovative way of controlling the large concentrations of gulls that plague airline traffic and airports. Peregrine falcons are used to disperse the flocks and in so doing are saving the airports and airlines lots of money from plane damage and artificial control devices to which the gulls soon acclimate and ignore. Now that's a super move!

February and March are times for timberdoodling. No this isn't one of those fad dances or a fraternity hazing technique. It's the fine sport of observing the courtship antics of woodcocks. Find an open field near a swamp or creek bottom and sit yourself down there on a cool evening. Just about the time your eyes tell you that you can't see beans you'll hear the nasal peent of the male woodcock. If you're lucky he'll ascent quickly for you and hover all atwitter and then drop like a stone to his original take-off point. You won't believe it's a bird. But you will be thrilled to be privy to his amorous endeavors.

As March progresses you can sense the time of return is here. Eagles, owls and great blue herons are already well into nesting. Ospreys, purple martins and swallows will be "in" by mid-month and as the lion roars its last days, gnatcatchers, parula warblers, Louisiana water thrushes and blue-winged teal will be amongst us. Be alert and be rewarded.

It's come to my attention that Tom and Thom are routing new paths on our local birding territory. In fact they have apparently worn a path into the marsh at College Creek. The two have recently been sleuthing about the area armed with their trusty tape recorders calling for rails. Their efforts have produced both Virginia and clapper rails and goodness knows how many second glances and shaken heads from disbelieving tourists!

The Roanoke Valley Bird Club offers a special membership category for James Watt. It's only \$9000.00!

How about putting a big X on Saturday May 7 on your calendar to reserve at least the morning hours and lunchtime for our Club picnic at York River State Park. More about this in next month's Flyer.

Ask Owl: The 1982 census of the Kirtland's Warbler in Michigan located only 207 singing males, down from 232 in 1981. This winter there were 73 whooping cranes at Aransas National Wildlife Refuge.